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ABSTRACT

Noting that many Latino parents have many questions about parent participation in their children's education and how to go about getting involved, this early childhood digest answers some of those questions by providing suggestions for ways parents can involve themselves in a child's education both at school and at home. Following a brief explanation of what schools in the United States expect of parents, the digest offers suggestions for how to help a child's education at home, such as ways to make sure children are healthy and well-rested, ways to encourage early language skills, ways to provide a good learning environment, and ways to share parents' expectations. Next, the digest offers suggestions for helping a child's education at school, such as using translators, getting to know the child's teacher, attending parent-teacher conferences, and learning about school rules and school programs. Finally, the digest offers suggestions for addressing problems with the school, such as being persistent, using the district's appeal process, and talking with parents and advocates outside the school. (HTH)

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Early Childhood Digest
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April 1999

National Institute on Early Childhood Development and Education

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Early Childhood Digest

Latino Families: Getting Involved in Your Children's Education

April 1999

My name is Lorena, and 10 years ago I came to the USA from Guatemala. Now I have a son in first grade and a daughter in third grade. Schools in this country want parents to get involved with the education of their children, but I'm not really sure what to do. Besides, we're so busy! School activities are often during the day when I'm working, and at night I need to stay home to take care of the kids. Even when I go to the school, it's hard to communicate because not many teachers speak Spanish.

Many Latino parents feel just like Lorena. They have many questions. What is parent involvement? What can I do at home to help my child learn better? How am I supposed to work with the preschools and schools in this country? Can I trust them?

These are hard questions, but they are important questions. Children are more successful when their families are involved in their education. One of your roles as a parent is to make sure that your child receives the best education possible. To do this, you need to be involved!

What do schools want in this country?

By schools we refer to childcare, preschool, Head Start, and kindergarten. If you grew up in Latin America, the schools might have been very different. Maybe parents expected schools to do all the teaching. In the United States, families and schools are supposed to be a team. The family is the biggest influence on a child's life, and the school is the next biggest influence. Schools expect parents to get involved, both at home and at school. Parents are supposed to ask questions. Your ideas and questions are important. The relationship between the family and the school makes a big difference in how much a child can benefit from school.

How do I help with my child's education at home?

- *Children learn better when they are healthy and well-rested.* You need to make sure that your children are getting enough sleep, going to the doctor for immunizations, getting dental checkups, and eating a healthy diet. Your community clinic can give you more information about how to do these things.

- *Children learn everywhere.* At home, you can teach your children the names and uses of things, like the furniture, the refrigerator, and the telephone. In the community, you can talk to them about things like cars, streets, stores, and the weather. They will be learning important language skills no matter what language you're speaking, so you should do these activities in whatever language is most comfortable for you.

- *Children need a good learning environment.* This means that you should take your children to the library, read books with them, and talk with them whenever you can, even when they are very young. Limit their TV watching. It's best to watch educational TV shows like "Sesame Street" or "Where in Time is Carmen Sandiego?" And if your children are old enough to have homework, they need a quiet place to study. All these things will help them do better in school.

- *Children need a positive attitude toward school.* Children learn attitudes from their parents. When you do all these things to get involved in your children's education, your children discover that you think learning is very important. Then they start to believe that learning is important too, and this has a powerful influence on how well they do in school.

- *Share your high expectations.* Perhaps you dream of your child finishing high school or attending college. Share this dream with your child often, starting at a very young age. Sharing your high expectations can help your child succeed.

How do I help with my child's education at school?

- *Use translators.* Ask the school for a translator if you need one. Or, feel free to bring along a friend who speaks both English and Spanish. If you want to speak with the teacher

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or someone else at the school, it is important that you understand each other well.

- *Build trust.* Many Latino parents are afraid of the government, and they know that schools are part of the government. Talk to other Latino parents who have gotten involved with the local schools to find out what their experiences have been.

- *Get to know your child's teacher.* Talk with the teacher frequently, even when things are going well and there are no problems with your child. Ask about your child's learning and behavior. Ask about things you can do at home to help your child learn better. Ask about ways you can get involved at the school—for example, helping out in the classroom or attending class field trips.

- *Attend parent-teacher conferences.* If you are not available at regular conference times, call and ask for a time that fits your schedule. Try to bring questions about things you would like to know, or things that are worrying you.

- *Ask questions.* To understand the school better, it is important to ask questions. How can I stop that bully from picking on my son in the playground? Why is my daughter painting in class when I want her to learn to read? The better you understand what's happening, the better it is for your child.

- *Remember, you are the expert on your own child!* When you talk to the teachers, you can teach them about ways to work better with your child. Maybe your son learns better when he sits closer to the teacher. Maybe your daughter will be sleepy because there was a fire alarm in your building last night. It's better for your children if you tell the teacher these things. Your feelings and opinions are important.

- *Learn about school rules and school programs.* Find out how they affect your child and how he or she can benefit from them.

What if I have problems with the school?

- *Keep trying.* Remember, teachers and principals are busy people, just like you. If you tell them about a problem and nothing changes, maybe they forgot or didn't have time yet to take care of it. Call them again, or write them a note. Don't give up, because then nothing will change. But they do need to listen to you. If you think they aren't taking your problem seriously, there are other things you can try.

- *Set up a special meeting.* Make an appointment to speak with the teacher or the guidance counselor about your concern. If that doesn't work, you may want to meet with the principal. You might be upset, but remember to stay calm!

- *If you do not agree, you can appeal.* Maybe you disagree with the school's decision about your child, such as being placed in a reading group that is too easy. Maybe the school won't hire enough translators. You have the right to appeal these decisions. You can find out how to start the appeal process by asking someone at the school or the school district office. It's important to do what you think is best for your child's education.

- *Talk with parents and advocates outside the school.* Your neighbor or someone at your church might already have solved a problem similar to the one you're having now. Some communities even have organizations to help Latino parents. Ask around to see if anyone has advice for you. Solving a problem can be easier when you have help.

Hi, this is Lorena again. It's been a real struggle, but this year I got more involved in my children's education. We have a quiet hour every night for doing homework, and I'm teaching my children to love reading and talking. When I asked the teacher, she even found a translator and offered me special meeting times that fit my schedule. After a year of getting to know people at the school, I feel more comfortable and welcome there. It wasn't always easy, but some of them were very helpful and friendly. Now I know how important it is to get involved, and I hope you will too.

This issue of *Early Childhood Digest* was prepared by Eliot Levine of the Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP). For information on HFRP and other publications, please write to HFRP at 38 Concord Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02138, call us at 617–496–4304, or visit our Web site at: ***http://hugse1.harvard.edu/~hfrp***

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